

Civil Society in Swaziland

August 2008

Swaziland has a vibrant and diverse civil society with a number of NGO's, trade unions, faith groups and political parties attempting to operate in extremely difficult circumstances. Those organisations working towards democracy in their country are frequently victimised and persecuted. This has led to both divisions with the civil society movement as well as united efforts to change the future of Swaziland.

Trade Unions

The objective of the trade union movement is the definition, promotion and implementation of the collective interests and rights of workers, particularly in relation to employers, but also in relation to the state and as part of broader civil society. Trade unions within Swaziland are also crucial in providing their members with many social and welfare services. As it stands, there are two federations operating in Swaziland, the Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions (SFTU) and the Swaziland Federation of Labour (SFL).

A number of trade unions are not presently members of a national federation. These are Swaziland National Association of Civil Servants (SNACS); Swaziland National Association of Teachers (SNAT); Swaziland Transport and Allied Workers Union (STAWU) and Swaziland Nurses Association (SNA).

SFTU

SFTU are organised in numerous sectors. Civil service always made up the majority of SFTU's affiliations, until SNACS disaffiliated. They represent the majority of quasi governmental service industries and public services. Retrenchment is a major issue facing the manufacturing industry at present and this has inevitably impacted on the SFTU's organisation in the sector.

Issues facing SFTU

The major issues that SFTU affiliates face are: massive retrenchments; outsourcing; sub-contracting; privatisation; casualisation; inadequate labour inspection and unscrupulous employers.

Internal problems have hampered SFTU's development somewhat. For three years the SFTU's largest affiliates withheld their affiliation fees whilst demanding accountability from the federation. The unions involved in the dispute were Swaziland National Association of Civil Servants (SNACS); Swaziland Nurses Association (SNA) and Swaziland Transport and Allied Workers Union (STAWU)

Politics

SFTU are not politically affiliated to any particular political party or movement. However they recognise that some of their affiliates are very politically motivated. They state that the main reason that SNACS has severed relations with SFTU is because of SNACS political agenda. Unofficially SNACS is said to be aligned closely with PUDEMO and they expressed frustration that SFTU and the wider trade union

movement were reluctant to politically associate themselves with the party. Furthermore there is the suggestion that within the SFTU there are divisions between those who hold PUDEMO membership and those who do not. The Secretary General is also accused of using people's membership to PUDEMO as basis to isolate them.

SFL

The SFL was founded in 1994, after a faction of the SFTU moved away from the federation after dissatisfaction was noted about the accountability of the SFTU. The SFL was left with 5,000 members; membership has significantly increased since then. According to both the SFL and COSATU, the union's move away from the SFTU was never intended to be permanent. However as problems failed to be resolved, political differences became apparent and disillusionment with the SFTU continued, hence the new federation was formed.

Organisation

Finance, retail and manufacturing are the sectors in which SFL are best organised. However, due to a lack of investment within the sectors, there has been an inevitable drop in membership. The investment of international manufacturing businesses and company outsourcing, has had a severe knock on effect on the union, due to the increasing problem of retrenchment.

Issues facing SFL

The SFL state that the main issues that they, along with their affiliates, are trying to overcome are as follows:

- Capacity limitation of the unions
- Legal action over workers rights
- Government interference in employment legislation
- The constitution
- Politics

The SFL are not politically affiliated to any particular political party or movement. However, when they have gone to the streets protesting in the past, PUDEMO members have often joined them and they have not turned them away.

The SFL understand that they are considered to be more conservative in comparison to the somewhat more progressive SFTU. They suggest that whilst the SFTU heavily engage in the pro-democracy struggle through direct action against the government, the SFL see the importance of doing this, their priority is fighting for employee's rights within the workplace. They understand that these issues are inextricably linked, but feel their resources are better spent on employer/employee relations.

SWAPOL

Swaziland Positive living (SWAPOL) was founded in 2001 by five HIV positive women after experiencing stigma and discrimination from their in-laws, families and community members. The organization currently has 1250 members, people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) in 30 communities.

SWAPOL's core business is to provide support to improve the quality of life for people living with HIV/AIDS affected families and Orphans and Vulnerable Children; to ensure availability of food at household level; to uplift economy status for PLWHAS through economic empowerment.

ACTSA and SWAPOL

ACTSA has been working together with SWAPOL for a number of years, campaigning for more attention to be given to issues surrounding HIV/AIDS in Swaziland. Specifically, ACTSA has been working with SWAPOL to develop a project entitled: Easing Access to Treatment, Care and Support of Orphans in the rural communities in Swaziland.

The Children of Swaziland

SWAPOL works with a UK charity called the Children of Swaziland whose aims are to provide support to the women and children in Swaziland who are infected and affected by HIV/AIDS through funding education and health care.

NCA

In 1996 PUDEMO were key in instigating the formation of the umbrella organisation the Swaziland Democratic Alliance (SDA). The aim was to unite organised labour groups, political parties, and civic organisations into a popular front. However the SDA disbanded in 2001. It was in latter years deemed as largely ineffectual, primarily due to its lack of capacity. Furthermore, some felt that major affiliates had too much sway over the decisions made by the coalition and therefore it was not fully representational of all members. Although officially disbanded, it appears that there is still a faction operating under the SDA name.

September 2003 saw the founding of the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA). The NCA's goals were to develop a way in which organised formations could inform on the content of the constitution and to mobilise the people of Swaziland to contribute to an alternative constitution. The NCA is a coalition body of wide ranging civil society organisations, including the Catholic Church coalition group, the Community for Justice and Peace; the Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions (SFTU); the Swaziland Federation of Labour (SFL); the Swaziland National Association of Teachers (SNAT); Ngwane National Liberatory Congress (NNLC); People's United Democratic Movement (PUDEMO) and a variety of NGOs and small groups and associations.

When the draft constitution was released by Prince David Dlamini in 2003 the NCA responded accordingly and worked upon ways in which to influence this constitution. Although there was nothing in the constitution that prevented organised groups from contributing to its formation, proposals and suggestions are routinely disregarded.

The ultimate demand of the NCA was for a democratic constitution that was driven by the people. Complaints they had included the fact that the draft was only produced in English and not Siswati, instantly alienating a large majority, particularly the rural population. Furthermore it did not separate powers of governance from the king and did not allow the people to elect a Prime Minister; it did not allow for a multi-party system of government and it did not guarantee human rights.

Political Background on Swaziland

The Kingdom of Swaziland was a British protectorate from the 1880s until independence in 1968 at which point a constitution was issued. The long standing King Sobhuza guaranteed the existence of a 'limited' multi-party democracy, however the king held veto power and absolute rights over various sectors of governance, including minerals and land. There was much distain for a constitution that was imposed by foreign powers.

Although the independent constitution did provide for opposing political parties, in the first parliamentary elections in 1967 the Imbokodo National Movement won by a landslide victory. From the outset there were allegations of corruption and manipulation by the traditional leaders, as Imbokodo was supported by royalty. Five years later, a parliamentary opposition was introduced with the election of three MPs from the nation's oldest party, the Ngwane National Liberatory Congress (NNLC), established in 1959.

In 1973, King Sobhuza issued a decree banning all political parties on the grounds that they are disruptive to national unity. The majority of civil society movements and opposition parties maintain that it was in fact to counter the threat of defeat if a truly multi-party system occurred.

PUDEMO

In 1983 the People's United Democratic Front (PUDEMO) were formed as an opposition party, with the ultimate goal of instilling a multi-party democracy. Since their conception, PUDEMO has been operating as an illegal movement.

It is a movement of the people committed to the creation of a free and democratic society in Swaziland. Its democratic commitment is centred on the firm belief that the pride of its sovereignty, freedom and unity should be the guarantee and respect of the will of the people.

On the basis of this background, PUDEMO was formed as a political representative of all the oppressed and struggling masses of Swaziland. It has consistently led and spearheaded the cause for political democracy, economic freedom and social progress through uniting and co-ordinating the determined struggles of the Swazi people into a common and conscious purpose for national liberation and democratic change in the interest of the oppressed and struggling masses of our country, who happened to be the working and rural majority, primarily.

In summary, PUDEMO is an active political force in the daily lives of the people, as it seeks to be a movement of mass participation and a force for unity at the centre of a broad range of allied organizations, mass democratic and community based structures.

United Front

The United Front are a recently formed political movement which is aiming to bring together different sectors of civil society through their collective struggle for democracy. The group has been formed as further commitments of both union federations to take on the Swazi government and kingdom politically.